

This night is different; This night is special by CiderApples

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Summary:

It's over.

Hop takes El home.

He takes them all home.

This night is different; This night is special

Author's Note:

Spoilers for pretty much everything.

The thing on the wall is gone. 'The thing on the wall' is the best way Hop can describe the thing on the wall, with its four-story glowing gash and light tentacles and death vines, but it's gone, now, and that's what he's going to tell himself until until they're way the hell out of here.

He picks El up and thinks she feels lighter.

No; he *knows* it. She's lighter. Even as limp, dead weight, she's too easy to lift over his shoulder. Wherever she was, they weren't feeding her.

Well, she's got boxes of Eggos coming to her, now. Boxes and boxes.

Miraculously, the elevator still works. Hopper tries not to look down, or around, or anywhere, as the thing ascends toward the lab. He's never been good with heights, and probably not any better now, thanks to this. The metal platform bangs and starts under his feet but he manages to maintain his balance while El's little bird-leg fingers curl up in the hair at the back of his neck, cold as ice. He shivers, but it's just another layer of shivering on top of the adrenaline shakes.

Does it wreck his credibility, when he tells her it's okay, if he's shaking like a massage chair?

"It's okay," he says anyway. He snuffles it into her Aqua-Gelled hair and she makes a really human sound: a kid sound. A very old memory flashes through him like radiation, leaving behind an electric residue that he's used to by now (but hates just the same). He gives El a squeeze because he needs to feel the pressure, himself — pressure he doesn't know how badly he needs, just to feel connected to something besides the black and gore — and she wakes out of her dead hang for a moment to curl every limb around him, clutching drowningly with her head tucked under the ruff of his coat. It makes

her even easier to carry.

He shakes his head. *So many Eggos.*

When the elevator clanks to a stop, he carries El over the bodies of dead demogorgon babies with a very weird stab of regret. They were kids, too. Somebody's murderous, open-face kids who wanted to eat guts, but still. He gets to carry *his* baby out, and—

His arms jerk hard around El's ribs and he goes instantly cold.

In another half-second he's made himself relax but she's already made a squishy little sound in protest to the sudden crushing.

"Sorry, kid," he gruffs.

His baby? No. He'll never, never think that word about her again. He can't. But suddenly it's all he can think. *His baby, his baby.*

Her smallness, her lightness, her full-bodied adhesion to his pudgy, useless body rips the old memories up out of him and he wants to mash his face down against hers and cry like she's not old enough to judge him for it: like she's six years old and he just got her back from the grave. But he fights it. He cries silently, invisibly, like a man, with no sign of El catching on as he shoulders out the front doors and heads for his car.

It doesn't take much effort to get her deposited in the front seat and buckled in.

He can't look her in the eye; not just yet. He's not stable.

"Be right there," he manages to say, as he slams the car door on her face, turns his back on the car and takes a few fast steps toward the rear. He can't trust that she won't hear, so he opens his mouth as wide as it goes, soundless, quieter than the tears dropping onto the asphalt, and cries. Bent half over, he braces on the taillights and worries for a second that he's not going to be able to get a breath: the muscles that squeeze his ribs clench relentlessly, and whatever sits over his stomach is tied in painful knots. His knees feel unsteady enough to worry about. He won't be able to run them anywhere else, if there's unfinished business left out there. Just the thought of it

makes him put a hand back to feel his gun. As his fingers tremble over the grip, something grabs them and he almost screams.

El doesn't say anything, as usual, even though Hopper's vertical jump gets him about three feet in the air. He turns midway and lands with a gasp that's half furious, half embarrassed, and mostly relieved that it's just her and not something with sharper teeth.

"Jesus Christ," he hisses, gulping back oxygen. "That has to stop. No more of that." He dops his hat, dops his head, dops the entire bridge of his shoulders and scrubs his hands through his hair before jamming the hat back in place and straightening up.

El just looks up at him, empty. The blood is still all over her face. She has cheekbones, now, and somehow he'd never noticed, but she still seems no older than the day he met her.

His baby.

Aw, shit.

He kneels.

She steps toward him, then toward him again. Suddenly her hands are on his face, poking awkwardly at the edges of his eyes where everything's wet.

"Why?" she says.

He keeps eye contact because he has to, but there's no way to stop his eyes from welling up again. Why bother now?

"Because I love you, kid," he says. He starts to say something else to soften it, but then — doesn't.

El pauses, her face hollow and blue in the dark. "Love?" she echoes, in her way.

"Yeah," he sniffs. "That's your word of the day. Don't you know that one yet? All that TV you watch—"

All the little bones inside El's tiny jeans, her kid-size grownup jacket,

they all launch at Hopper at once, so hard he exhales audibly on contact. The surprise of it doesn't wear off until he feels her cold hands icing through his flannel, and then he folds himself around her as best he can. Between his bearlike arms and the tent flatps of his XXL coat, he does it pretty well.

*

They roll into Joyce's driveway, and the minute Hopper turns off the car is the minute he remembers he doesn't live here.

El is looking at him with a quiet confusion.

"Just, uh, here to check on a few things," he says. "Then, home."

For some reason, this puts a smile on her face, but then it fades. "Mike?" she asks. Hopper puts both hands on the steering wheel and blows out a steely breath. Her face falls.

"Yeah," he says. "We should make sure everyone's okay." He unbuckles himself. Then her. She beams. "Come on," he says, "let's go."

*

Hopper's not going home tonight. He'd known it the moment he'd realized where he'd driven, and when he walks through Joyce's front door, he does it with that knowledge.

The place is empty. He's beaten the rest of them here.

For a long minute, he stands in the middle of Joyce's living room, feeling the ugly creepiness of Will's crayon scrawls sucking the sense of triumph right out of him, and then Eleven comes and stands beside him. She stares over the walls, the ceilings, and his face. Then she walks up and slaps her hand flat against a vee in the maze, ripping pages off the wall in her fist. She looks back at him for approval, but knows she's going to get it: she's already smiling.

He joins in. He works high, she works low, and the living room is totally clear by the time the first car roars back into the driveway. Hopper moves to the hall, then Will's bedroom, as the kids pile in the

door. The short ones reunite with happy boy-screams and peals of victorious laughter and someone is yelling something about leveling up. The Harrington kid comes wandering down into the hall toward him, looking shocked and a little worse for wear.

Okay, a lot worse.

They look each other over, and let it pass with some manly nodding, and the both of them tear into the papers on the wall.

*

Joyce Byers and family are the last ones to walk through their own front door, and when they do, the map is almost completely gone. They'll find stray sheets for the next few days — up over the fridge, or behind a door, or fallen into a cabinet through the cracks — but right now the walls seem pure as holy water.

Joyce stares at him, stunned, but grateful. He does his best 'just-doing-my-job' face and it seems to put her at ease.

She goes right to the kitchen and starts pulling down food: junk food, good food, any food she has. Even with his wits frayed, Hopper observes that there isn't a lot, but he grabs the bag of Jax and acts greedy.

The kids are like wolves. They eat, they howl, they run and jump and pounce in the front rooms and eventually Hopper is forced deeper into the house by the sheer energy of it. He goes down the hall and swings a right into what seems like a dark, empty room.

It's dark, all right.

"Hey," Joyce says, quietly. "I'm...in here. Didn't want to scare you."

He puts a hand up and starts to back out, but that's not what she wants.

"You don't have to, um, go," she says. Her face is slightly less wild than usual, probably from the total and complete exhaustion, and she sits on the bed in a slumpen ball.

“Okay,” he says. He hugs the door frame and stays where he is.

She’s smoking. She takes such a long drag he doesn’t know that he could compete.

“You okay?” he asks. “Not- I mean, given the circumstances. How’re you holding up?”

She looks up at him incredulously, with big pale moon eyes. Somehow it’s hilarious.

“Yeah,” he says. “I hear that.” He wanders in, suddenly freed to do so, and reaches for her cigarette to share.

*

This night is different and special.

This night will not be examined later for things that are wrong or different or strange, aside from the things that happened before they arrived here, back home again.

This is why, when the cigarettes have all been smoked, Hopper pulls back the blankets in Joyce’s bed and puts her in it, and why she pulls his arm down with her. He keeps everything on but his jacket, gun and hat. The buttons and trim on the rest of him don’t seem to hurt her when she presses back against them.

Joyce’s shape is bigger than Eleven’s, which Hopper feels nestle up against his back in the middle of the night. His body jolts awake when she crawls into bed, making a tiny cat-size dent in the mattress. She’s followed by the boys, then even Max, who drag their sleeping bags in and lay them like the walls of a fortress around Joyce’s bed. Their rustling wakes Joyce quickly enough, but he snugs her up so the panic doesn’t get its claws in, and it doesn’t take long before her breathing evens out again.

If she’s worried about what the boys will think of them, she doesn’t voice it.

This night is different.

El settles into a comfy spot where she can poach as much of his body heat as she requires, and Hopper puts a hand back to pat her reassuringly on some unidentified part of her body, swaddled in blankets. When her hand wiggles around his waist he almost breaks his face smiling.

Joyce falls asleep before the boys quit whispering. Hopper can tell by the slow of her breath, and the little twitches of her body, like she's still fighting somewhere. He's sure she is. He's sure she will be, for a while. But he'll be here. They'll all be here.

He kisses her head, through her still-wild hair.

"Night," he whispers, and is out like a light.